

EXPLORING CO-CREATION

A Resource for Anyone Working with
Young Children

Exploring how we understand, listen to, support, grow with, learn from, dance, sing
and create with young children...



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Introduction

This collection offers some resources for practitioners and organisations starting co-creation work with young children. Many of these resources are being used by the partner organisations in the Energiser Fund learning community, in their projects exploring co-creation with children aged 2-4 and their families. We hope it serves as a useful introduction and a starting point to find out more.

At Youth Music we believe it's important that babies, children and young people are placed at the heart of creativity and creative projects. Work should listen to them, respond to them and be shaped and driven by them. But what does this mean for babies and toddlers?

INTRODUCING CO-CREATION

There are many definitions and understandings of co-creation. There are also many different terms: 'co-creation', 'co-production', 'co-design', 'working co-creatively' and more.

As Heart of Glass and Battersea Arts Centre (2021) note "this field of practice has a long and contested history and resists easy categorisation" and indeed "one of the key strengths of this field of practice is that it resists definition because it is owned by many". Considering Co-Creation, the first reference in this collection attempts to tackle this question and bring together existing resources. Listening to children's voices is fundamental as a starting point for co-creation and the collection then looks at approaches to research with children and ethical considerations. Next are some specific approaches to listening and documenting such as the Mosaic Approach, Slow Pedagogy, Funds of Knowledge and the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework. Holding Lightly, Voice of the Baby and Let's Create focus on the planning cycle and the role of practitioners and organisations in co-creation work, offering an insight into the skills involved and questions that might be helpful reflection points for practitioners. The collection then looks at some specific examples of early years arts practices: Reggio Emilia inspired projects, approaches with materials, and embodied approaches.

There are many existing resources on 'Youth Voice' and these can be very useful for working with older children and young people. The resource The Youth Voice and Participation Handbook (Becko and Raven, 2020) introduces some of the most common approaches. These approaches come with some limitations however, particularly in early years contexts. They sometimes reference adult-oriented structures and language such as 'boards', 'consultation', and 'feedback'. It is not always obvious what these processes might look like with children in the early years. They also suggest a focus (though not necessarily) on verbal communication. This may be restrictive when thinking about children in the early years (though may also be limiting for other children and young people).

Similarly, terms like 'listening' and 'voice' are often used in resources focused on the early years. We recognise, as noted above, that these can be problematic as they suggest a focus on verbal communication. In this resource, we sometimes use 'listen' and 'voice' where referencing their use by other authors. We have tried to highlight throughout that children's perspectives may be expressed in other-than-verbal ways and that listening may also involve embodied and sensory dimensions. Some Energiser Fund partners have found the term 'noticing' helpful as a broader term.

We have also used various terms such as artists, practitioners, teachers, children, and participants. We recognise that different terms will be appropriate in different contexts and that everyone doing this work will identify differently.



Photography by Beth Moseley

Considering Co-creation

Based on research carried out in 2021, Considering Co-creation aimed to: support the development of a shared understanding of co-creation in the cultural sector; review and curate existing resources; and develop further new resources.

Analysis of a survey of artists indicated that practices and the language artists used to describe those practices, were very varied. However, some themes that were identified towards a definition of co-creation:

- Co-creation is a process or a methodology, that is collaborative from project planning, through the artistic activity and through to evaluation and dissemination.
- Agency and power are shared between everyone involved and all have the chance to make creative decisions about the work.
- Everyone involved is seen as equals and the skills and abilities of participants are seen and valued.
- The work aims towards some form of social change, or a social justice aim.
- There is a sense of collaboration and working with others (although this may incorporate a range of different types of relationships).

Artists in the survey were reluctant to reduce something so complicated to a list of ingredients. However, some essential conditions or characteristics of effective co-creation were identified as:

- transparency, honesty and fairness;
- trust, respect and care;
- time and resources;
- clarity on aims and expectations;
- equality and reciprocity.

The report also highlights barriers to co-creation and points out the need for time and funding in order to be able to do this work well.

A bibliography includes a section on children and young people.

Creative Communities. (n.d.). What is Co-Creation?. <https://creativecommunities.uk/what-is-co-creation/>

Heart of Glass and Battersea Arts Centre. (2021). Considering Co-Creation. <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/research-and-data/considering-co-creation>

Podcast: Considering Co-creation

Three discussions around issues in co-creation, one with artists, one with producers/commissioners, and one with participants/collaborators.

BACxHoG. (2021). Considering co-creation. <https://soundcloud.com/user-553957247/sets/considering-co-creation/s-waTNryl5f6m>

Research with young children

Co-creative processes can start at the project's outset, including research to understand children's views on the places, programmes, relationships or other issues in their lives. Research concerned with children's rights has moved from talking about research on children, to research with or for children (and families). Children can be seen as participants in the research process rather than objects of study – although the degree of participation that children have in any given process can vary a lot of course.

Such research needs to take account of the fact that children's ways of expressing themselves may be different from those of adults (and different between different children). Sevón et al.'s (2023) meta review identified a variety of methods used to explore and capture children's perspectives.

- **Multi-method** approaches use a variety of different forms such as drawing, map making, walking tours, photography, role play and storytelling, bringing them together to build up understanding.
- **Observations** of children's behaviours, actions, gestures and other non-verbal expressions can be video recorded, and then watched back, shared with children, or shared with caregivers or key workers.
- **Interviews** with children can be carried out in playful ways or supplemented with toys or other materials.
- **Visual methods** use children's photographs, videos and drawings.
- **Creative or playful** methods involve storytelling, role play or model making.

Christensen, P., & James, A. (2017). *Research with children* (3rd ed.). Taylor & Francis.

Flewitt, R. (2005) Is every child's voice heard? Researching the different ways 3-year-old children communicate and make meaning at home and in a pre-school playgroup. *Early Years*, 25(3), pp. 207-222.

Mukherji, P., & Albon, D. (2022). *Research methods in early childhood: An introductory guide* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Sevón, E., Mustola, M., Siippainen, A., & Vlasov, J. (2023). Participatory research methods with young children: a systematic literature review. *Educational Review*, 77(3), 1000-1018. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2023.2215465>

Tisdall, K, Clarkson, E & McNair, LJ. (2024). Child-led research with young children: Challenging the ways to do research. *Social Sciences*, 13(9). <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci13010009>

Understanding Research with Children and Young People - Open University Course
<https://www.open.edu/openlearn/health-sports-psychology/understanding-research-children-and-young-people/content-section-overview?active-tab=description-tab>

Ethics and safeguarding

An important part of creating a safe space where children feel able to communicate and create, is considering ethical and safeguarding concerns.

Procedures such as consent or permission forms may be familiar in research projects, but even those projects or programmes which don't officially fall under the remit of 'research' will have ethical dimensions. For some activities consent may be sought, but this can go beyond signing forms. It might include:

- a continuous and ongoing process of observing for participants' wellbeing
- looking out for sign of distress (which might be expressed non-explicitly and non-verbally)
- respect for participants' rights (including to non-participation).

Recognising children's vulnerability must also be balanced with a respect for their abilities and competences so their voices can be heard. How we view children and their families and power dynamics between everyone involved need to be thought through carefully.

Youth Music's safeguarding hub offers useful resources around moving beyond compliance with safeguarding and towards a safeguarding culture.



Photography by Andrew Moore

Bertram, T., Pascal, C., Lyndon, H., Formosinho, J., Gaywood, D., Gray, C., ... Whalley, M. (2024). EECERA ethical code for early childhood researchers. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 33(1), 4-18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2024.2445361>

Einarsdóttir, J. (2007). Research with children: Methodological and ethical challenges. *European early childhood education research journal*, 15(2), pp. 197-211.

Lyndon, H. (2023). Embracing the breadth of ethical complexities in early childhood research. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 31(2), 143-146. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2023.2208469>

Youth Music. (2025). Safeguarding Hub. <https://www.youthmusic.org.uk/resources/safeguarding-hub>

Wallis, N. (n.d.). Positioning families as co-researchers at the museum: How do we see and hear the voices of parents and children? *Ethical Research Involving Children*. <https://childethics.com/case-studies/positioning-families-as-co-researchers-at-the-museum-how-do-we-see-and-hear-the-voices-of-parents-and-children-by-nicola-wallis/>

Mosaic Approach

The Mosaic Approach offers a way of understanding children's perspectives by gathering information through a variety of different means. It takes its name from the idea of putting lots of pieces or 'tiles' together to build up a picture. This multi-method approach recognises the different 'voices', 'languages' or forms of expression that children may have.

The approach focuses on children's lived experiences, sees children as experts in their own lives and is participatory. Methods used may involve children taking researchers/practitioners on tours, documenting what is important to them with cameras, drawing maps or making other drawings, observation and interviews.

As data is reviewed and the 'tiles' brought together, there is shared reflection, dialogue and interpretation between children and relevant adults. A follow up study more explicitly identified a third stage of decision making, to highlight the action taken based on the information gathered.

Developed from a research project by Alison Clark and Peter Moss, it is often used by teachers in practice. This reflects that all effective early years practice should take account of children's experiences and interests and is particularly relevant when working co-creatively with young children.



Photography by Beth Moseley

Clark, A. (2017). *Listening to young children: A guide to understanding and using the mosaic approach* (3rd ed.). Jessica Kingsley.

Clark, A., & Moss, P. (2011). *Listening to young children: The mosaic approach* (2nd ed.). National Children's Bureau for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

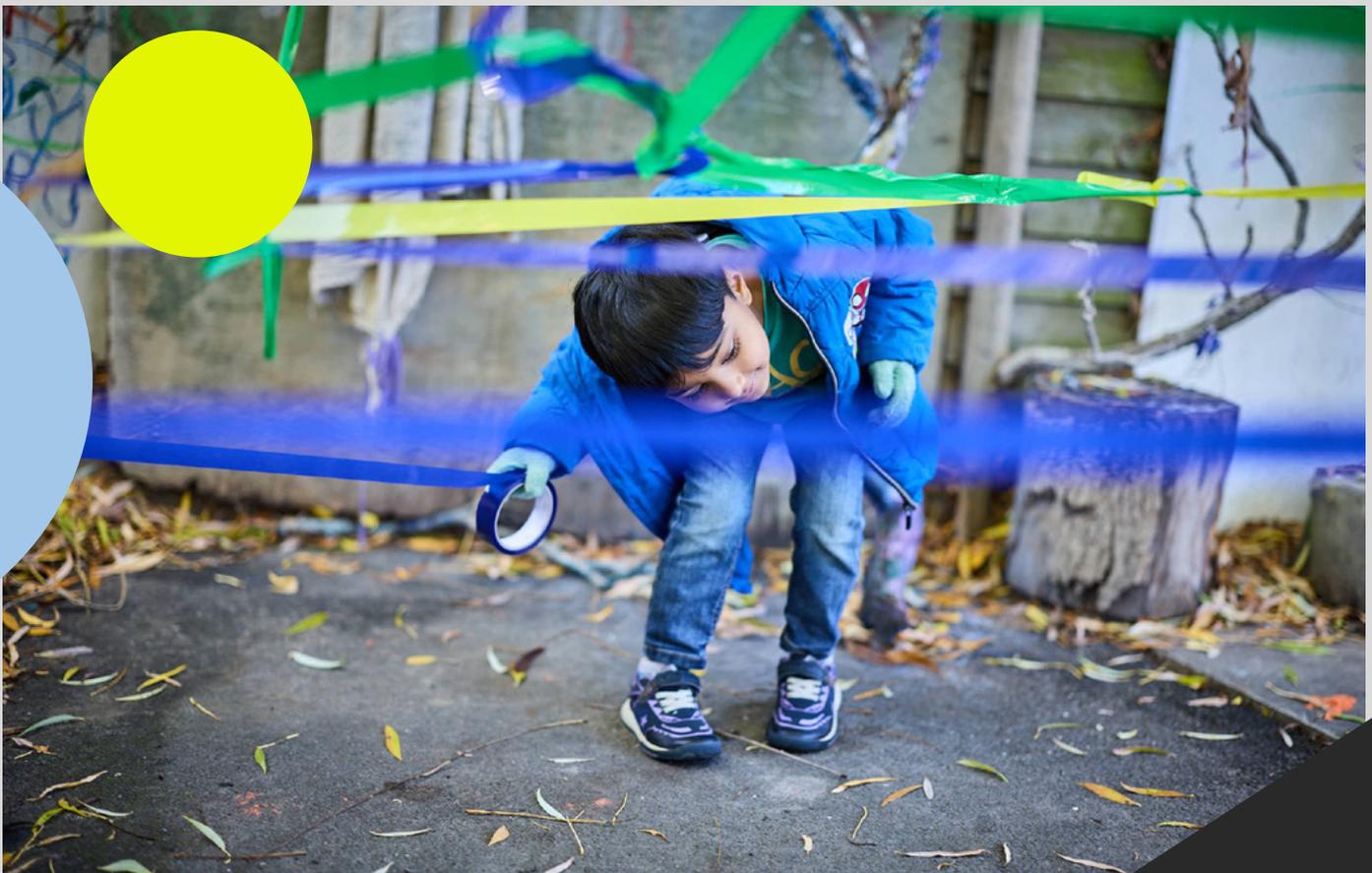
Clark, A., Moss, P., & Kjørholt, A. T. (Eds.). (2005). *Beyond listening: Children's perspectives on early childhood services*. Policy Press.

Slow Pedagogy

Slow Pedagogy encourages valuing the present, being with children and taking the time to 'listen' and pay attention to children's interests and experiences. It recognises that children may take their learning in unexpected directions and it encourages allowing time for children to revisit their ideas, creations, and stories and to go deeper in their experiences and their learning.

The project was developed in response to the pressures on early childhood education settings and the demands placed on them through testing and measurement, as well as post-covid catch-up narratives. It aims to make space for those things that are more difficult to measure or assess, such as imagination or creativity.

Time is essential for co-creation and slow practices lend themselves well to making time to build relationships, build trust and create the safe spaces needed for the risk-taking and open-endedness associated with co-creation.



Photography by Andrew Moore

Video: Slow pedagogy. Froebel Trust. (2022, July 6). Slow pedagogy - making time for children's learning and development. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/4HI-Xa9X0AU>

Pamphlet: Time for Childhood: Slow pedagogy. Green, D. & Clark, A. (2024). Time for Childhood: Slow pedagogy. Froebel Trust. https://www.froebel.org.uk/uploads/documents/FT_Slow-Pedagogy_pamphlet.pdf

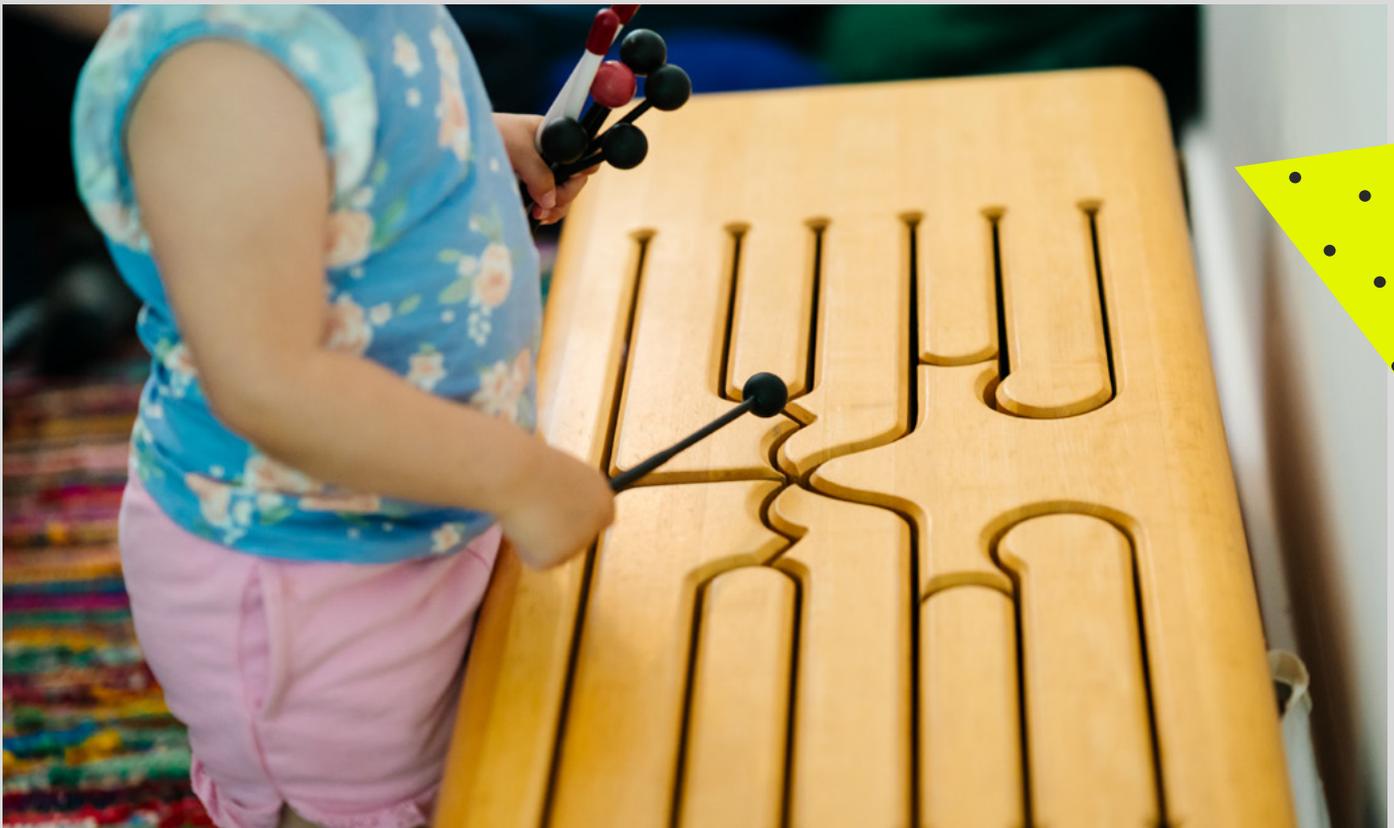
Clark, A. (2023). Slow knowledge and the unhurried child: time for slow pedagogies in early childhood education. Routledge.

Funds of Knowledge

Developed in the 1980s in Arizona, the Funds of Knowledge approach challenges the belief that underperforming students from minoritised backgrounds lack valuable skills. It suggests that these students and their families do have important knowledge, skills and competencies but that these are overlooked by practice and structures within schools. By visiting students' homes, teachers can learn about this knowledge and integrate it into their teaching to make learning more relevant and effective.

The approach involves building trust (“confianza”) between schools and families to develop cooperation. Home visits by teachers allow them to identify and integrate families' skills and knowledge into school practices. Several iterations of FoK projects suggest that education is enhanced when teachers learn about their students' households and daily lives.

Although originally developed for curriculum design in secondary schools, the concepts of building trust and of recognising the competence of children and their families are also relevant when working co-creatively in the arts and with young children and their families.



Photography by Beth Moseley

Website: Funds of Knowledge Alliance. <https://fundsofknowledge.org/the-funds-of-knowledge-approach/>

Llopert, M., & Esteban-Guitart, M. (2016). Funds of knowledge in 21st century societies: inclusive educational practices for under-represented students. A literature review. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 50(2), 145–161. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2016.1247913>

Moll, L. C. (2015). Tapping Into the “Hidden” Home and Community Resources of Students. *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, 51(3), 114–117. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00228958.2015.1056661>

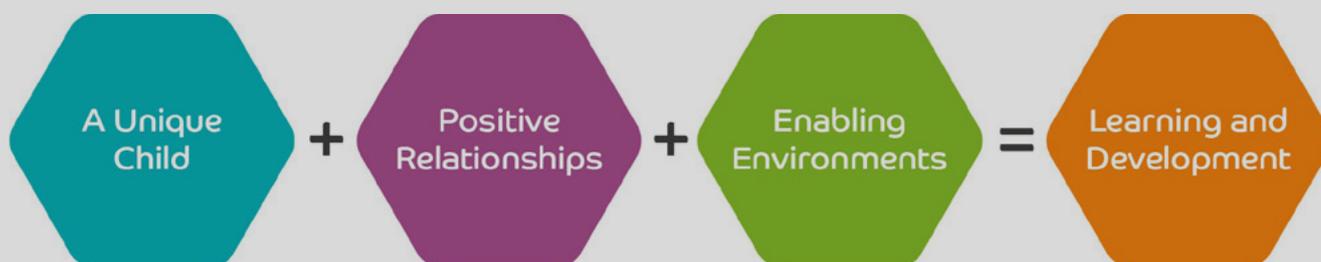
Early Years Foundation Stage

The Early Years Foundation Stage Framework sets out the standards that school and childcare providers must meet for children from birth to five.

We might immediately think of 'co-creation' as a specific project, in a particular time or place. Ongoing everyday practice in education and care settings however can share many principles with working co-creatively.

- The EYFS highlights that children learn through play and recommends child-led as well as adult-guided learning.
- The principle of the 'Unique Child' suggests that practice should involve learning about and responding to children as individuals.
- The Characteristics of Effective Learning further highlight the importance of playing and 'exploring', 'active learning', and 'creating and thinking critically'.

The non-statutory document 'Birth to Five Matters', which supports practitioners to apply the EYFS, offers a section on 'Promoting voice and inclusion'. This highlights that children's voices may be expressed non-verbally. It also points out the importance of listening to children's families and recognising the importance of children's homes and communities.



From EYFS

Restoke – Holding Lightly

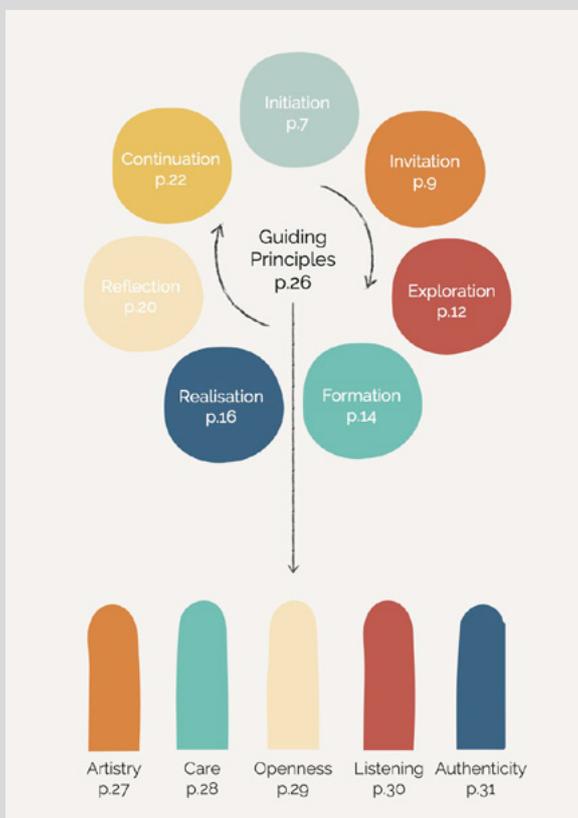
Holding Lightly outlines Restoke’s approach to making performances with communities, with both professional and non-professional performers.

The seven-stage cycle moves through:

1. an **initiation** process, selecting show themes which specifically require the lived experience expertise of marginalised local communities
2. **invitation** (both open and targeted)
3. **exploration**
4. **formation** including practical and logistical decision
5. **realisation** and sharing the work with an audience as well participatory processes for receiving audience responses
6. **reflection**
7. **continuation**

It is underpinned by the five principles of artistry, care, openness, listening and authenticity.

The resource includes a graphic showing how the dynamics of power fluctuate through the process and tips for putting together call outs and some reflective questions.



Starcatchers - Voice of the Baby

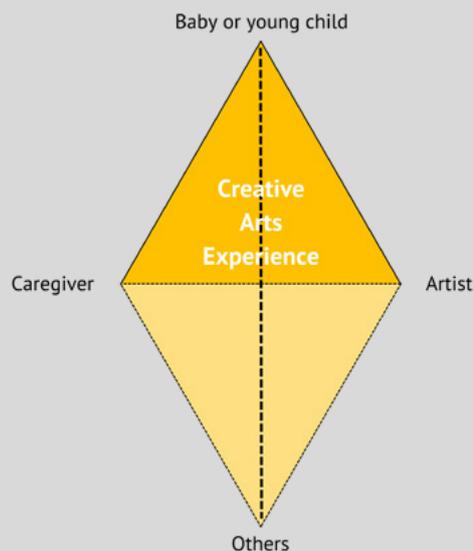
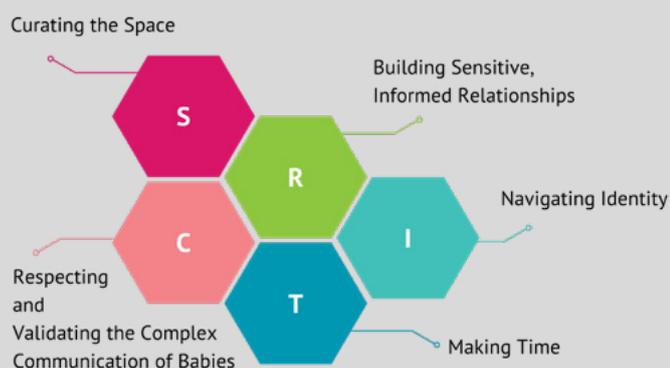
Starcatchers' Voice of the Baby resources draw on the organisation's rights-based approach to children's participation in the arts in Scotland and specifically their creative play sessions for 0–3-year-olds.

The Reflective Guide aims to support practitioners to embed rights-based approaches in the creative arts and offers five areas for practitioners to consider:

- **Curating the Space** (creating permission for play and creativity);
- **Building Sensitive, Informed Relationships** (warm, affectionate interpersonal interactions);
- **Navigating Identity** (of yourself as the artist, the space, and the people within it);
- **Respecting and Validating** (the complex communication of babies);
- **Making Time** (for young children to be heard).

The guide's Kite model maps the various interactions that can happen in sessions, between child, carer, artists and others, all of which may influence children's participation.

Although the word 'voice' is used, the report points out that children may express their 'voices' through not only words but also through non-verbal vocalisations, actions, gestures, expressions and silences. The authors note that the guide may also be relevant for older children and young people who communicate in non-verbal (other-than-verbal or more-than-verbal) ways.



Drury, R. & Blaisdell, C. (2024). Voice of the Baby: A Reflective Guide for the arts. Starcatchers.

<https://starcatchers.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Voice-of-the-Baby-A-Reflective-Guide-for-the-arts.pdf>

Drury, R., Blaisdell, C. & Ruckert, C. (n.d.). Voice of the Baby: Phase Two Summary Research Report. Starcatchers.

<https://starcatchers.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Starcatchers-Voice-of-the-Baby-Phase-Two-Summary-Research-Report.pdf>
Gives further explanation of the themes, with quotes and examples from the evaluation of the Starcatchers project 'Voice of the Baby'

Let's Create – Do We Know How To?

This resource aims to highlight the highly complex, but often unnoticed or undervalued skills of artists involved in co-creative practice. It is divided into three sections:

Artists' qualities (ways of being that an artist embodies) include:

- being open to a range of creative influences and people's ideas
- using both more grounded and more expansive forms of energy as appropriate
- a sense of care for participants
- being adaptable to unpredictable processes
- being authentic and not trying to replicate the style of others
- and being patient with processes that need time.

Artists' skills (ways of doing things) include:

- holding space for the various ideas that many come up in a group
- deep listening and communication
- skills in a given art form
- facilitation skills such as developing participants' ideas and threads of inquiry.

Artists' responsibilities (the things an artist holds ethically, contractually or artistically) include:

- aiming to create a space where people feel safe and have a sense of trust
- to have a good knowledge of safeguarding policies and procedures
- to be able to navigate the complex ethical issues involved in co-creation such as shared ownership of work and how to use people's personal stories
- understanding the limits of the artist's role and the need for support from or signposting to other professionals if relevant (particularly relating to mental health)
- balancing tensions with project stakeholders who have pre-determined outcomes
- ensuring participants have a positive experience and a positive ending, even when they have shared or processed difficult emotions.

[Podcast episodes](#) explore each skill in further detail.

Alexander, N. (2024). Let's Create. Do we know how to?
<https://www.naomi-alexander.com/lets-create-do-we-know-how-to>

Watson, R. (2023). Gathering Summary – Co-Creation and Participatory Arts. ArtWorks Alliance.
<https://artworksalliance.uk/gathering-summary-co-creation-and-participatory-arts/>

The Reggio Emilia Approach

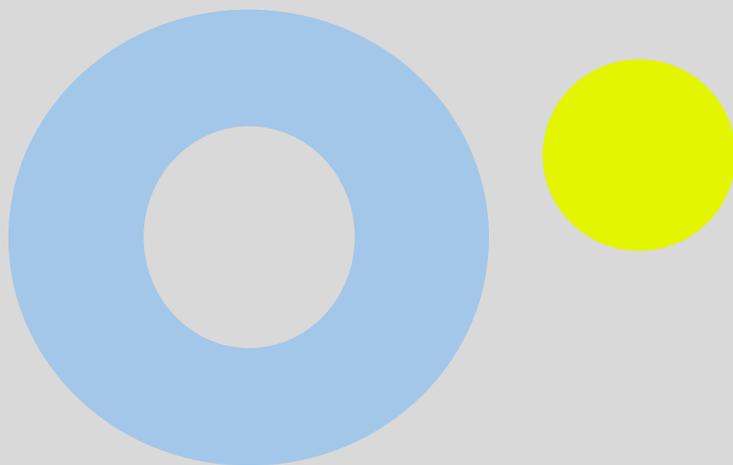
The Reggio Emilia approach is an educational approach developed in the infant-toddler centres and preschools of Reggio Emilia, Italy. This approach developed over many years but spread more widely particularly during the expansion of these centres through the second half of the twentieth century.

A key principle of the approach is that the child takes an active role in constructing their own experience and learning. The child is viewed as having strengths and abilities, and it is recognised that these can take multiple forms. This is depicted in the poem '100 Languages' by Loris Malaguzzi (a key figure in the development of Reggio Emilia centres).

Some key practices that have been taken on by those working within early years arts contexts are:

- the importance of the environment;
- the importance of documenting the learning process;
- the role of the 'atelierista' who works in a workshop (or atelier), an environment designed to support artistic and creative work. The learning environment is also said to be the 'third teacher' (along with the teacher and parents/carers). For more on this see the next section, working with spaces and materials.

Some examples of how this inspires and translates into practice by UK arts organisations, nurseries and practitioners are shared below.



Website: Reggio Children. <https://www.reggiochildren.it/en/>
Offers in-person and online professional learning.

Website: Sightlines Initiative. <https://sightlines-initiative.com>

Website: 'How to catch a moonbeam and pin it down' – Moonbeams. <https://www.crec.co.uk/moonbeams>

Website: Inspirations nursery - <https://inspirationsnurseries.co.uk/our-atelierista/>

Parakeet Studio. (2025). Championing play and creativity in Sandwell: an interview with Amy Campbell. Creative Black Country. <https://www.creativeblackcountry.co.uk/blog/2025/3/17/championing-play-and-creativity-in-sandwell-an-interview-with-amy-campbell>

Young, S. (2024). Making and Believing. Take Art. <http://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/takeart/Making-Believing-Research-Report-digital.pdf>

Working with spaces and materials

Museums or gallery spaces may find that their spaces and collections set a framing for creative work. However these spaces can also be places for co-creation. This could range from collaborations with visitors, to using the space as both workshop and exhibition space, to working with families as co-researchers to understand what museums offer young children and families.

Penfold (2016) describes how art museums can become creative laboratories, not just transmitting cultural values but constructing knowledge and values together. She also points out that a creative laboratory could be anywhere in a community: “a makerspace as part of a community centre, a tinkering studio in a science centre, a fab lab within a children’s museum, a woodwork area in a secondary school or a digital learning space in a library”.

Open ended materials might be particularly effective. These can be used in an endless number of ways and offer opportunities for experimentation, exploration and transformation. Plentiful quantities (where resourcing allows) of the same item can also be helpful. Through observation and reflection, an attuned adult can adapt the space and materials to support children’s curiosity and interests. The Loose Parts Toolkit provides further resources for working in this way.



Photography by Andrew Moore

Casey, T. and Robertson, J. (2019). Loose Parts Play (2nd ed.). Inspiring Scotland.
https://www.playscotland.org/resources/print/Loose-Parts-Play-Toolkit-Revised.pdf?plsctl_id=10924

Penfold, L. (2016). Art museums as creative laboratories for children’s play, experimentation and the co-creation of culture. Art Museum Teaching. <https://artmuseumteaching.com/2016/06/17/art-museums-as-creative-laboratories-for-childrens-play-experimentation-and-the-co-creation-of-culture/>

Sakai, C. (2017). Co-Production with families. Victoria and Albert Museum.
https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/news/our-studio-summer-events-for-families-2016?doing_wp_cron=1750683433.8991389274597167968750

Wallis, N. (n.d.). Young children in the museum – exercising agency through cultural engagement. CREC.
<https://www.crec.co.uk/becera-posts/young-children-in-the-museum-exercising-agency-through-cultural-engagement>

Wallis, N. (2024). The Family Welcome: A Museum Research Project. University of Cambridge.
<https://www.museums.cam.ac.uk/blog/2024/07/26/the-family-welcome-a-museum-research-project/>

The Dance of Reciprocity

[This video](#) documents a project by Turned On Its Head Dance, Dr Jools Page, and London Early Years Foundation. The dance practice focuses on how communication and connection can happen through movement, eye contact, or gaze. This practice aims to accept the child in the moment and encourage adults to step into children's shoes.

Early years practitioners valued the opportunity for children to take the lead. In the film adults in the settings, both artists and early years practitioners, interact with children by observing and mirroring their movements. Teachers noticed how children seemed surprised at being trusted with this responsibility and power to lead and create the dance.

Even outside of dance as a specific art form, children's embodied expressions are still important. [Take Art's early years videos](#), many of which are primarily in musical contexts, show a similar importance of gesture and movement. In many of these videos too, it is not only the artists who are interacting with children, but early years practitioners, caregivers and family members.



Screenshot from Professional Love video

Matt Laurie. (n.d.). Intensive Interaction – socially inclusive approach to PMLD and autism communication. <https://www.mattlaurie.com/intensiveinteraction>

Take Art. (2025). Early Years Video Library. <https://takeart.org/early-years/early-years-video-library>

Think Brighton. (2024, June 19). Professional Love: The dance of reciprocity. Research in Early Years education and embodied dance. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OVSn8BwgdlI>

About the Energiser Fund

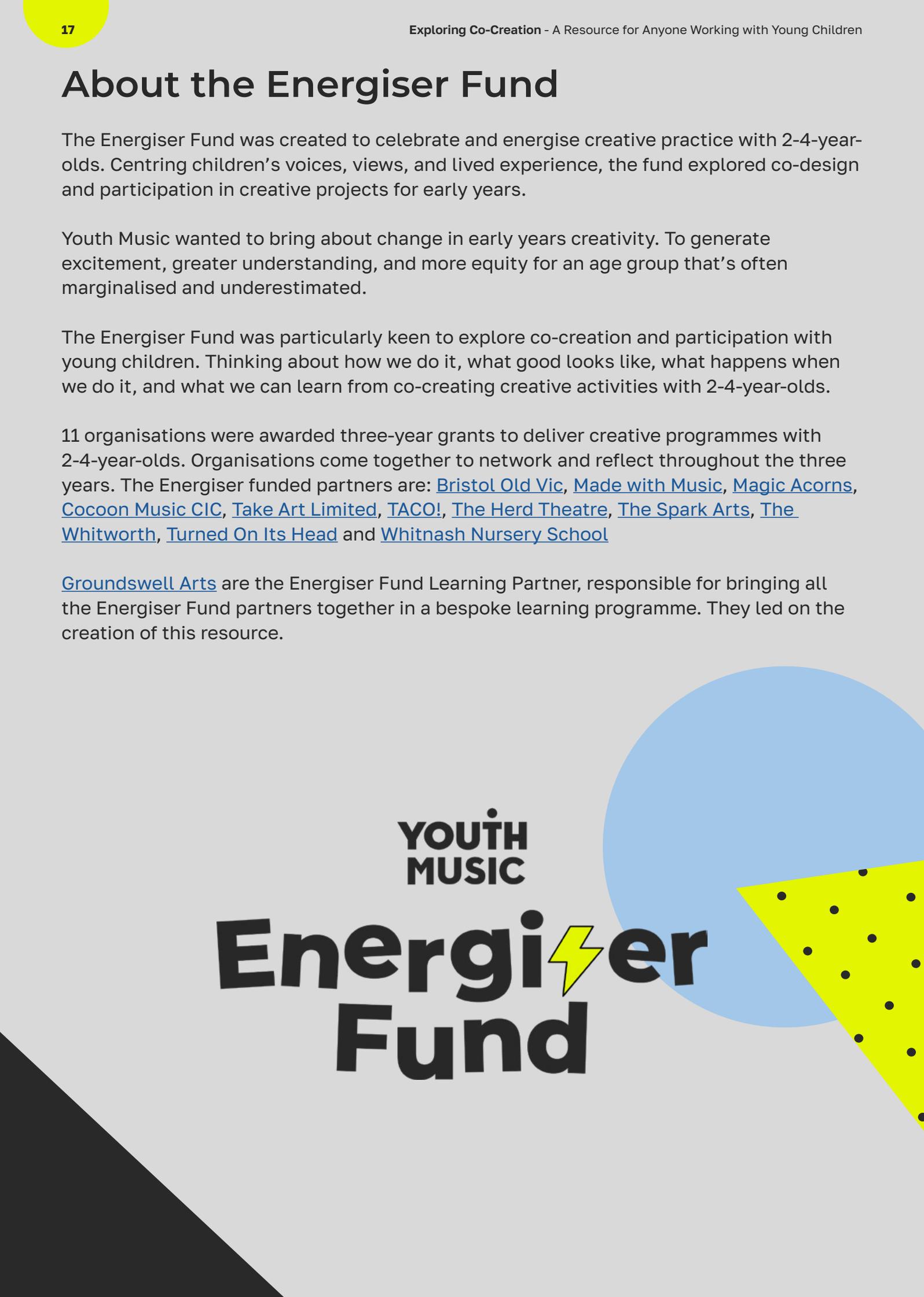
The Energiser Fund was created to celebrate and energise creative practice with 2-4-year-olds. Centring children's voices, views, and lived experience, the fund explored co-design and participation in creative projects for early years.

Youth Music wanted to bring about change in early years creativity. To generate excitement, greater understanding, and more equity for an age group that's often marginalised and underestimated.

The Energiser Fund was particularly keen to explore co-creation and participation with young children. Thinking about how we do it, what good looks like, what happens when we do it, and what we can learn from co-creating creative activities with 2-4-year-olds.

11 organisations were awarded three-year grants to deliver creative programmes with 2-4-year-olds. Organisations come together to network and reflect throughout the three years. The Energiser funded partners are: [Bristol Old Vic](#), [Made with Music](#), [Magic Acorns](#), [Cocoon Music CIC](#), [Take Art Limited](#), [TACO!](#), [The Herd Theatre](#), [The Spark Arts](#), [The Whitworth](#), [Turned On Its Head](#) and [Whitnash Nursery School](#)

[Groundswell Arts](#) are the Energiser Fund Learning Partner, responsible for bringing all the Energiser Fund partners together in a bespoke learning programme. They led on the creation of this resource.



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About Youth Music

We're a national charity. We help marginalised young people to make and monetise music.

Every year, we raise £10 million to fund inspirational grassroots music projects and support aspiring young creatives up and down the UK.

We're campaigning to break down barriers for young people facing inequity, exclusion and discrimination.

Together with our partners, we're helping the next generation to transform their lives through music. [Join Us.](#)

YOUTH MUSIC FUNDING

Youth Music runs several grant programmes.
Read more about them on the [Youth Music website.](#)

Youth Music's Energiser Fund works across the arts, and is financed with National Lottery funding, which we receive through Arts Council England.

